

The Thing about Museums constitutes a unique, highly diverse collection of essays unprecedented in existing books in either museum and heritage studies or material culture studies. Taking varied perspectives and presenting a range of case studies, the chapters all address objects in the context of museums, galleries and/or the heritage sector more broadly. Specifically, the book deals with how objects are constructed in museums, the ways in which visitors may directly experience those objects, how objects are utilised within particular representational strategies and forms, and the challenges and opportunities presented by using objects to communicate difficult and contested matters. Topics and approaches examined in the book are diverse, but include the objectification of natural history specimens and museum registers; materiality, immateriality, transience and absence; subject/object boundaries; sensory, phenomenological perspectives; the museumisation of objects and collections; and the dangers inherent in assuming that objects, interpretation and heritage are 'good' for us.

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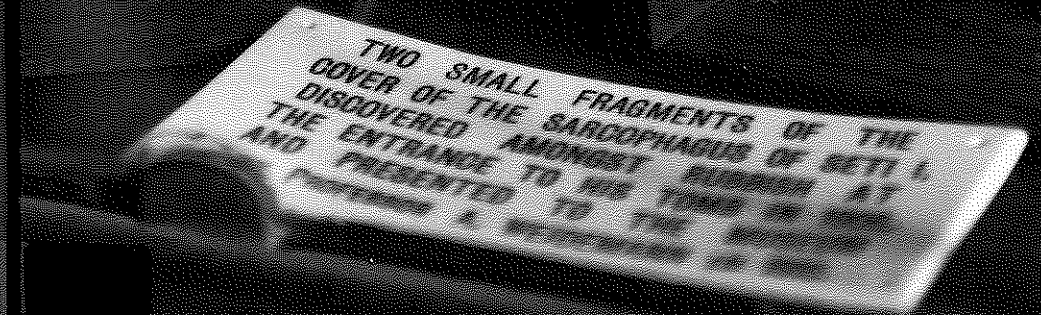
THE THING ABOUT MUSEUMS

EDITED BY SANDRA DUDLEY,
AMY JANE BARNES, JENNIFER BINNIE,
JULIA PETROV AND JENNIFER WALKLATE

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THE THING ABOUT MUSEUMS

OBJECTS AND EXPERIENCE,
REPRESENTATION AND CONTESTATION



EDITED BY SANDRA DUDLEY, AMY JANE BARNES,
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ROUTLEDGE

- Richmond, M. (2008) 'And the objects on the table spoke', in N. Clayton and K. Featherstone (eds) *Words and Things: writing creatively from objects and art*, Leicestershire: Leicestershire County Council.
- Stewart, C. (2004) 'The value of memory', in N. Clayton and K. Featherstone (eds) 'Some intrinsic value', unpublished poetry anthology, Leicestershire County Council.
- Thompson, P. (2008) 'Stag-beetle', in N. Clayton and K. Featherstone (eds) 'The skin between two worlds', unpublished poetry anthology, Leicestershire County Council.
- Twell, T. (2007) 'Kitchen bowl – Donington-le-Heath', in N. Clayton and K. Featherstone (eds) 'You hear us on wires', unpublished poetry anthology, Leicestershire County Council.
- Tyler-Bennett, D. (2006) '3 character poems', in N. Clayton and K. Featherstone (eds) 'The trick of watching', unpublished poetry anthology, Leicestershire County Council.

14 Location and intervention

Visual practice enabling a synchronic view of artefacts and sites

Shirley Chubb

The museum site can be perceived as a permeable membrane where specific ethnographic or anthropological meanings communicated through display are exchanged with the personal experience and knowledge of the viewer. In addition, the significance of displayed objects shifts as their meaning interacts with contemporary events. This flow of meaning creates an interstitial territory between museum, artefact and audience, a connective space where new understandings may be fleeting or considered, but are often unrecorded. The two visual art exhibitions considered here, *Hold* (1995) and *Thinking Path* (2003), manifested this interstitial space through artworks that intervened in the curatorial norms of display and suggested a synchronic view of artefacts and site.¹ The work responds to the museum as a catalyst and used visual methodologies to question the relationship between the museum site and the external world of the viewer.²

The aim of this chapter is to provide a reflexive analysis of this process by considering the relationship between the physical and conceptual elements that form the work and the theoretical considerations that underpin it. From the perspective of the artist the concepts implicitly embedded in the work are communicated visually through the use of materials and modes of presentation. However, the work also allows for a textual analysis that considers how this visual practice fused the relative cultural positions of artefact, location and audience by investigating potential meanings as a hybrid visual whole. Drawing from existing curatorial structures and the inherent cultural position of each museum, the process of intervention invites the viewer to challenge accepted norms of looking in response to a hybrid visual outcome that articulates potential relationships between the past and the post-colonial present.

Susan Pearce's incisive analysis of the intimacy between the engaged viewer and the displayed object, and her description of artefacts as 'material equivalents to the grammar of language', is of particular relevance here (Pearce 2006: 21). In considering Saussure's principles of *la langue* as the 'underlying system which makes possible various types of behaviour', and *la parole* as 'the actual instances of such behaviour' (Culler in Saussure 1978: xvii), Pearce recognises the museum as a physical redefinition of *la langue*, or an indicator of what, paraphrasing Saussure, she describes as the 'structured whole' of society (Pearce 2006: 21). Within the museum itself, artefacts can be understood as expressions of *la parole*,

with individual items combining into 'sets' where meaning 'depends upon relationships, and categories are created by the distinction which divides one set from another' (Pearce 2006: 21).

The work cited here continues from this point to build a visual interpretation of Saussure's further definition of diachronic and synchronic systems of language analysis, where the *diachronic* acknowledges the chronological development of a language whilst the *synchronic* attempts to construct an understanding of a given language as a whole in any given period (Culler in Saussure 1978: xx). An example of Saussure's theoretical tools is the linguist who, in a *diachronic* study, would follow the evolution of a language within a given timeframe, such as French from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, where similar facts are analysed in order to establish general truths (Saussure 1978: 99). A *synchronic* study, however, would forgo tracing the history of a language such as Old French between two historic points, in favour of analysing the similarity of facts and principles revealed in other languages, such as Bantu or Greek (Saussure 1978: 99). This approach considers the relationships encountered between languages when 'passing from one to another' (Saussure 1978: 99).

Hold and *Thinking Path* developed individual and cumulative works that utilised, questioned and interpreted the diachronic reflection of history often expressed in museum displays. Simultaneously, each exhibition developed to combine artefacts, timeframes, site and location to create visual interpretations that reflect Saussure's relational synchronic system. By identifying key issues between 'inter-related items', the combined nuance of artefact, artwork and site was defined by the individual history of each element as well as by their cumulative relationship within broader cultural systems (Culler in Saussure 1978: xxi).

The history of artistic interventions within museums, archives and heritage sites has covered increasingly broad frames of reference, from the anthropological or ethnographic to the economic or social, the scientific or the mythical. Of particular relevance here is the work of Joseph Kosuth who, amongst others, used intervention to critique the foundations of power and control that underpin museums and the consequent influence upon public perception. Kosuth questions what constitutes artistic practice by presenting existing works from various sources alongside extracts of pertinent critical theories. Within *The Play of the Unmentionable* (1990) he comments that:

If art is to be more than expensive decoration, you have to see it as expressing other kinds of philosophical and political meaning. And that varies according to the context in which you experience it. This particular exhibition tries to show that artworks, in that sense, are like words: while each individual word has its own integrity, you can put them together to create very different paragraphs. And it's that paragraph that I claim authorship of.

(Kosuth in Freedberg 1992: 27)

An additional work of intrinsic relevance here is Fred Wilson's exhibition *Mining the Museum* (1992). Wilson's work has been widely acknowledged for its

forceful engagement with America's racist past and the representations of slavery that exist in particular museums. Wilson's racial identity is at the core of his practice and the strength of his work lies in his ability to engage with selected artefacts objectively, suppressing the imposition of a personal moral stance by employing a 'questioning process' as the underpinning basis for his work (Corrin 1994: 13). As with Kosuth, the viewer is implicated in the work and it is they who are asked to question 'Where am I in all this?' in response to the deeply uncomfortable and penetrating scenarios that Wilson presents to them (Corrin 1994: 13).

Both *Hold* and *Thinking Path* grew from a focused interest in the high Victorian era of African colonialism and considered the seminal relationship between this relatively recent past and the present, giving visual form to Edward Said's observation that:

Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps.

(Said 1993: 1)

Hold

First exhibited in 1995, *Hold* resulted from an invitation by Anthony Shelton, then Keeper of Non-Western Art and Anthropology, to explore Brighton Museum and Art Gallery's Non-Western Art collections. At the core of the exhibition was a consideration of the symbiotic relationship between the original use of artefacts and their contemporary location. Reflecting what Pearce has described as the power of 'the actual object' (Pearce 2006: 25), six works built upon African artefacts and used visual practice as a communicative tool for the content or meaning extrapolated from each artefact (Biggs 2006: 191). Embedding the artefacts within the contemporary artwork directly represented the force of encounter experienced as each item, previously held in storage, was reaffirmed through public display. The resulting combination manifested the diachronic trajectory between the original provenance of the artefacts and their current status within the holdings of a regional British museum, a journey that Michael Ames describes as the 'career' of an object (Ames 2000: 141). The juxtapositional form of presenting hybrid work which 'both physically and conceptually "holds" the objects' was a critical element in the equation of new synchronic meanings (Shelton, Hilty and Reason 1995: 23). The original act of handling the artefacts is further reflected in the exhibition title *Hold*, which conveys the empathic response set in motion by the physical act of holding and examining artefacts. It also communicates the notion of a museum's collection or holdings and reflects how these two realities, the personal and the institutional, become reliant and accentuated by the other, held together.

Initial explorations within the museum stores yielded an item of particular relevance, namely a section slice of a mango tree bearing a brass plaque upon which was inscribed the legend:

Piece of the mango tree
cut down in October 1930
under which
Henry M. Stanley
met
David Livingstone
at Ujiji
Lake Tanganyika
Central Africa
November 10th 1871

The plaque, which in isolation identifies a diachronic point in the development of colonial Africa, became the literal and metaphorical centre of the exhibition. Taking the origin of the artefact as a title, *Tanzania* uses the meaning indicated by the significant historic provenance of the plaque to dictate both the materials and size of the respondent artwork. An indicator of an iconic historic encounter, accounts of Stanley's preparations for the journey to meet Livingstone were translated into material form in the work. In preparing for his journey in January 1871, Stanley describes sourcing a substantial store of items for barter, tribute or bribes and the need for cloth, beads and brass wire to negotiate progression through the interior (Newson-Smith 1978: 67). Having identified the contemporary equivalent to the gauge of wire used by Stanley, it was cut to 1.5-cm lengths. Laid end to end each segment signified individuals involved in the intervening period between past and present and formed a spiralling ribbon linking the original plaque to an identically shaped version bearing the names of contemporary African states (Figures 14.1 and 14.2). The connective line of brass wire initially forms a diachronic visual representation of the relationship between colonised and contemporary Africa, where form manifests 'temporal antecedents' linked 'in a causal chain' (Culler 1985: 74). When seen within the expanding environments of *Hold*, the museum and the external social context, the visual language of *Tanzania* recognises the plaque as a catalyst of interrelated systems creating a 'move from the diachronic to the synchronic perspective' (Culler 1985: 74).

The diachronic 'projection back and forth of historical readings' was explored further through artefacts such as a small woven food basket catalogued as originating from Angola (Hilty in Shelton *et al.* 1995: 29). Here the initial acceptance of the basket as familiar craft object was challenged by its placement alongside identical cases bearing short phrases taken from *The Times* newspaper. Each phrase was extracted from anniversary accounts of Angola's ongoing civil war, moving the viewer from independence in 1975 to the point of exhibition.³ The linguistic element further references Saussure, as selected phrases create an individual language in the form of a bleak cumulative poetry that is worryingly familiar.⁴

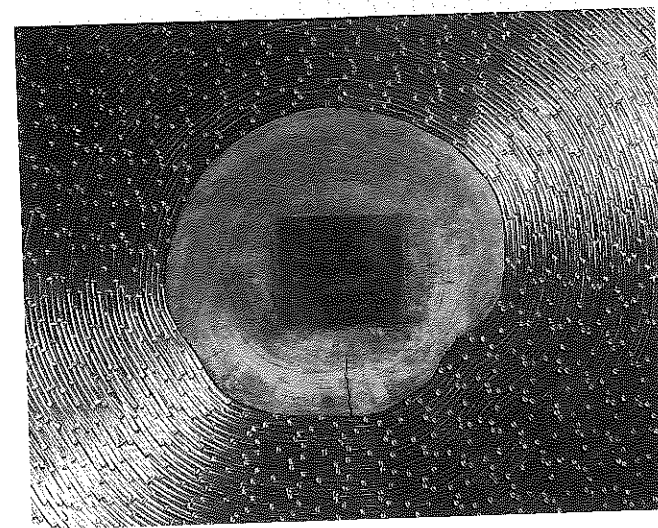


Figure 14.1 *Tanzania* (detail), 1995. Commemorative plaque mounted on section of mango tree, cut brass wire. Photograph © Fred Woodley with permission of Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove.

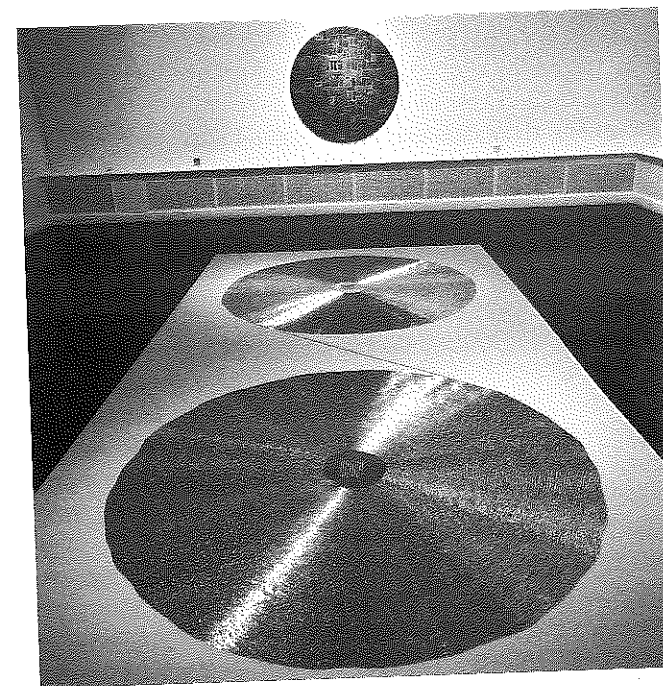


Figure 14.2 *Tanzania & Ghana I*, 1995. Mixed media, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery. Photograph © Nicholas Sinclair with permission of Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove.

Language becomes physical, positioned at the interface of text, image and object within each case. Although the placement of text is sequential, its presentation as a physical visual phenomenon within *Angola* invites the viewer to create individual patterns of viewing and reading with consequent connections.

The immediacy of Asante brass weights as signifiers of cultural values prompted *Ghana I*, a physically and conceptually synchronic work that revealed a matrix of associations. The work replicated the lost wax process used to make the original weights by using unrefined beeswax sourced directly from Africa. Here, however, the fabrication technique stopped at the point of the wax positive, momentarily inverting familiar systems of colonial trade, as the wax itself became the product. No longer seen in isolation, the visual language of each small artefact appears literally and metaphorically caught between two stages of development, generated by one culture they are consumed within another, and point to the problematic evolution of post-colonial cultures and economies.

Within *Hold*, casing systems also became an active participant in the accumulation of meaning. Replicated within the artworks, and obscured by specific materials, cases were effectively transformed into surrogate artefacts. This was most apparent in *Provenance Unknown*, a work that responded to the forceful signification of a powdered milk tin that had been transformed into a drum by the addition of animal hide. The resulting item becomes an arresting example of the coalescence of cultures, reaching us in a state of, in Annie Coombes' terms, original hybridity (Coombes 1994: 218). A synchronic understanding of the artefact is indicated by the addition of eight cases coated with milk powder referencing the gestation of a child. These cases invited the viewer to consider contemporary debates surrounding the marketing tactics of multi-national companies within non-European countries, broadening and re-aligning our understanding of the divergent uses fused within the artefact. As a drum it can be seen as an archetypal symbol of non-Western culture; however, when fabricated as a by-product of European commerce, Western systems of taxonomy become confused. The accepted ethnographic title becomes a synchronic pointer to both the idiosyncratic nature of the artefact and the social dilemmas that it manifests.

The range of synchronic associations explored within *Hold* were further expanded as the exhibition toured to new venues. The location of the exhibition at the University of Essex Gallery (1996) reflected what Coombes has observed as the 'weight of meanings' attributed to objects (Coombes 1992: 41). At this venue, the nuance of the work engaged with an institution whose purpose is to explore, debate and define understanding and knowledge in a variety of educational spheres. At Ferens Art Gallery, Hull (1997), *Hold* was exhibited alongside a newly commissioned work, *Sampler acc.806* (1997), based on a rare sampler held by the Wilberforce House Museum. Dating from around 1807 and promoting the anti-slavery campaign, the original sampler was reconstituted within a new work featuring additional imagery linking its original production to the present. The significance of the newly reconstituted work within *Hold* and its location within the city known as the home of the abolitionist William Wilberforce added further to the synchronic breadth of the exhibition.

Thinking Path

Thinking Path, first exhibited in 2004, was a visual response to the life and influence of Charles Darwin. Commissioned by Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, initial research was undertaken with the support of English Heritage at Down House, Darwin's family home in Kent.⁵ Down House was bought by Darwin in 1842 (English Heritage 2007). He and his family grew to love the house and associated lifestyle and in 1846 Darwin commented 'My life goes on like clockwork and I am fixed on the spot where I shall end it' (Wilson 2000: 31). The grounds to the house show Darwin's fascination with every aspect of his natural environment and include the Sand-walk, a small tract of land that Darwin leased and eventually bought from local landowner Sir John Lubbock (Keynes, Coulter-Smith and Forgan 2004: 15). Habitually walked by Darwin on a daily basis, the Sand-walk became a haven from external pressures and a vehicle for the meticulous long-term observations that fuelled his emerging theories (Figure 14.3). Predominantly a solitary exercise, Darwin also enjoyed company whilst walking, with his friend the botanist Sir Joseph Hooker recounting how they often visited the Sand-walk 'round which a fixed number of turns were taken, during which our conversation usually ran on foreign lands and seas, old friends, old books, and things far off both to mind and eye' (Keynes *et al.* 2004: 16). Later anecdotes describe the Sand-walk as Darwin's 'thinking path', a phrase which, when adopted as the exhibition title, acknowledged the actuality of Darwin's physical and mental presence, whilst also enabling the path to signify the broader impact of his theories.

In considering the relationship between the study of linguistics and biology in the early nineteenth century, Culler identifies potential links between Saussure and Darwin. He states that both theorists recognised the need to break with history by treating 'individual languages or species as autonomous entities which could be described and compared with one another as wholes' (Culler 1985: 63).



Figure 14.3 'The Sand-walk' (2003). Down House, Kent. Photograph © Shirley Chubb by kind permission of English Heritage.

Diachronic forms of study provided the sequential basis to new forms of thinking that re-aligned historic relationships in order to provide new synchronic overviews.⁶ Within *Thinking Path* the diachronic progression of Darwin's life and theories, and their relationship to the present, are reconstituted through a process of recording the Sand-walk. Here the experiential element of encounter explored in *Hold* played an increasingly formative part, as the house, grounds and more specifically the Sand-walk itself, become the pivotal core of the exhibition.

By accentuating a sense of contemporary physical presence in an external space, documentary video footage of re-walking the path reflected Rebecca Solnit's observation that 'Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world' (Solnit 2002: 29). This documentation also became an essential means to curate ideas by using visual form as an openly associative alternative to the myriad texts analysing Darwin, his theories and legacy. During the exhibition tour the video footage was shown on small LCD screens within museum cases, effectively transforming experience into artefact. The performative element of retracing Darwin's footsteps re-animated the micro-environment of the path as the judder of each pace created a sense of faltering movement through the landscape and a collective movement through time. The 1,600 paces of the walk became a way to structure these thoughts as each step was imbued with an individual figurative or representational identity. Layers of diachronic reference were further defined by documenting the path on the anniversaries of four significant dates in Darwin's life: his birthday; the return of the *HMS Beagle* from its five-year voyage; the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859); and the day he died. This enabled a numerical subdivision of the 1,600 paces into four day-groups of 400 images each. A further subdivision orders the days into sequential panels of 20 images that ascend in number from 1 to 20. The resultant image panels were used as an episodic means to curate meaning.

Stills from the video documentation captured blurring, sunbursts and shadow, enhancing the sense of a fleeting experience as split seconds of time were frozen and extracted from the sequential whole. Each still alternates with found imagery detailing aspects of Darwin's life and contemporary manifestations of his theories, creating a framework of synchronic references that cross timeframes and physical spaces. Specific to particular historic, cultural and environmental references, the accumulation of imagery considered aspects of the anniversarial qualities of each day, from the fragility of birth and death, to the empowerment of travel, and the inexorable accumulation of global knowledge. Images of the path therefore provide a literal continuum for the narrative imagery, the combination of which suggests further interwoven synchronic interpretations and anticipates Tim Ingold's consideration of the multiple linearities that shape our engagement with the world and his suggestion that 'Retracing the lines of past lives is the way we proceed along our own' (Ingold 2007: 119).

Individual glass lenses were used to animate each image as the viewer scanned or analysed the accumulated array presented to them (Figure 14.4). The lenses reference Darwin's use of the microscope to reveal, literally and conceptually,

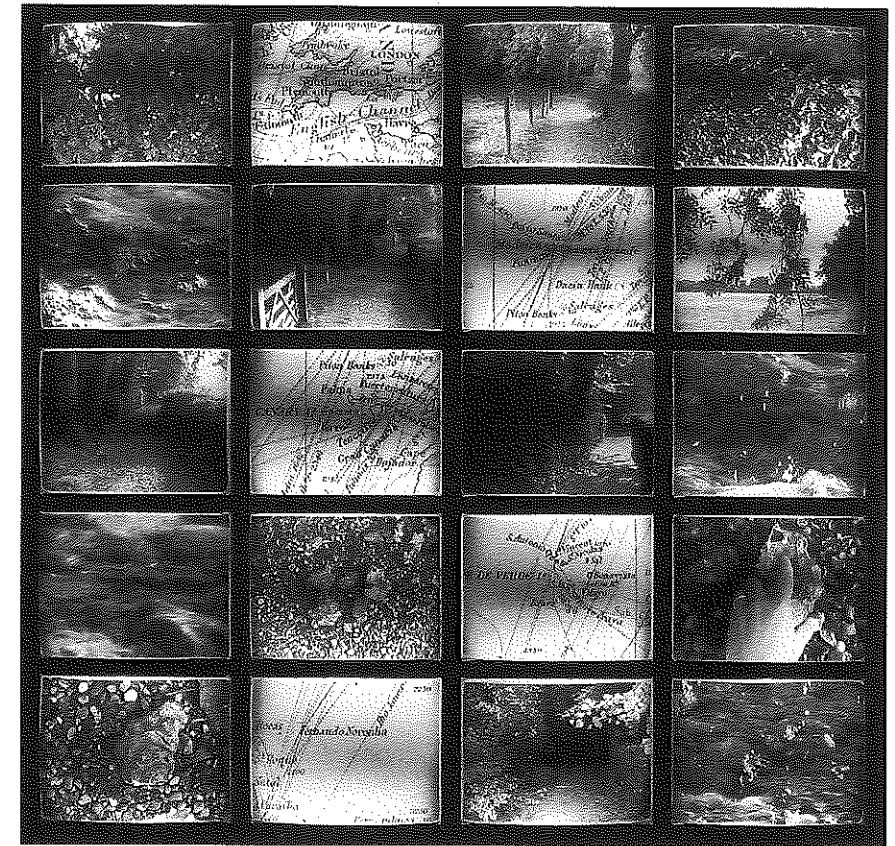


Figure 14.4 *Beagle Journey 02.10.1836/2003 #7* (2003). Glass lenses, polypropylene and digital print, 255 × 260 mm. Photograph © Shropshire Museum Service with kind permission.

what cannot be seen with the naked eye. Simultaneously, they reference how contemporary technology enables a vicarious experience of reality and how science has expanded our vision of the world. Tracey Bowen has observed how we increasingly understand the 'materiality, physicality, corporeality' of the world through electronic technologies, and how haptic space is 'disrupted by the mediation of technology . . . disappearing behind the screen or monitor' (Bowen 2008: 3–4). The static images of *Thinking Path* traverse this issue, digitally sourced and indicative of multimedia displays, they are reconstituted through the physicality of the lens. The slight shift prompted by the curvature of each lens suggests movement as the simultaneous imagery accumulates a filmic fluidity. However, the choice of reading sequence is relinquished to the viewer who can alter the pace of connection between images which 'like evolution, . . . does not have a beginning or an end, just a constantly changing middle' (Coulter-Smith in Keynes *et al.* 2004: 31).

Darwin drew upon and compiled an eclectic mix of knowledge in the construction of his theories, a process that maps on to *Thinking Path* and is particularly pertinent within the development of each set of anniversary panels, where groups of imagery were generated, selected and juxtaposed to create narrative subdivisions. The diachronically structured system of presentation adds order to the accumulation of images whilst simultaneously animating various synchronic frames of reference and interpretation. Of particular note was Darwin's heightened awareness of the relationship between distant and domestic environments. Whilst articulating with acute insight how apparently mundane encounters could reverberate with meaning and association, Darwin was also able to cross-reference between disparate experiences in order to formulate generic theories (Darwin 1985: 459). His account of experiencing a Brazilian forest for the first time is a prime example of his contagious enthusiasm as he describes how:

[I]f the eye attempts to follow the flight of a gaudy butterfly, it is arrested by some strange tree or fruit; if watching an insect one forgets it in the stranger flower it is crawling over, – if turning to admire the splendour of the scenery, the individual character of the foreground fixes the attention.

(Darwin quoted in Browne 2003a: 211–12)

Such observations show how Darwin explored processes of association that directly influenced the accumulation of imagery within *Thinking Path*, where the eye is invited to flicker and roam through images encouraging a consequent mental journey of association for each viewer.

Also of crucial significance is Darwin's ability to frame what were essentially abstract ideas, a process that is directly referenced in the use of the grid format to enable sequential cross-referencing between images.⁷ Janet Browne's articulation of Darwin's methods can be applied to the aims of *Thinking Path*, which acknowledge the breadth of Darwin's influence through accumulation rather than the identification of a single definitive image. As Browne states:

Darwin had no crucial experiment that conclusively demonstrated evolution in action. He had no equations to establish his case. Everything in his book was to be words – persuasion, revisualization, the balance of probabilities, the interactions between large numbers of organisms, the subtle consequences of minute chances and changes. Like Charles Lyell in his *Principles of Geology*, he had to rely on drawing an analogy between what was known and what was not known.

(Browne 2003b: 55)

Building on processes of collaboration initiated in *Hold*, *Thinking Path* toured to a series of venues specifically relevant to Darwin, and involved a heightened curatorial role in negotiation with host venues. The synchronic nature of the panels was enhanced at each museum by the addition of core artefacts chosen for their ability to resonate with the themes explored in each anniversary. These

included items that variously acted as metaphors for Darwinian theories on natural selection or adaptability, whilst other items referenced the constant human pursuit of knowledge. Of particular note was the incorporation of the *Grinshill Sandstone* showing fossilised ripple marks from the Triassic Period, an item that exquisitely signifies the interconnectedness of vast expanses of time and simultaneously displays the fleeting nature of all organic life. The additional use of a satirical *Darwinian Ape* (c.1890) showed how acutely Darwin upset the hierarchies of existence that dominated his contemporary Victorian society.⁸

In addition to the core artefacts, display systems at Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery and subsequent venues were redefined in response to the site as chosen artefacts were relocated from permanent collections to be seen alongside *Thinking Path*. At Down House the house and gardens themselves became the wider installation site as, exhibited in a small domestic room, the dense grid of wall panels immersed the viewer within the 1,600 images, suggesting new associations that re-animated both the internal site and the external grounds that inspired the work as a whole. At Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery a series of ceramic figures depicting the elements, seasons, continents and senses accompanied the work. Representing ancient order systems seen as the bedrock of understanding, the figurines were shown in a pyramidal form contemplated by the Darwinian Ape which, placed at the apex of the display, was seen to condense contemporary knowledge and question former hierarchies. The intervention of *Thinking Path* at Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in Bournemouth involved the relocation of statues and busts alongside specific panels, where they re-animated issues such as the Victorian predilection for sentimentality as a vehicle for expression and the role of museums in the definition of cultural identity (Figure 14.5).⁹ The



Figure 14.5 *Thinking Path*. Mixed media. Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum (2004). Photograph © Mandy Schaller by kind permission of Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum.

Origin of Species panels were implacably observed by a series of sculptures of British political, social and military figures, whilst at the centre of the group were two works by Pietro Calvi, entitled *An Arab Chief* (c.1860) and *A Black Queen* (c.1881). Sculpted in marble and bronze, this couple are very much 'the other' amongst the iconic figures that surround them and epitomise nineteenth century attitudes to non-Western races, where difference was eroticised in order to make it palatable to Victorian sensibilities.

As *Thinking Path* redefined itself at each venue the exhibition moved beyond the format of a biographical survey and reflects what Albano, paraphrasing Lyotard, has described as a 'self-contained narrative' that enabled the visitor to move 'into an artificial, hence, illusionary, temporal and spatial dimension as the exhibition subject unfolds' (Albano 2007: 24). The internalised world of accumulated imagery induces a sense of location in relation to Darwinian thought within the audience, whilst the context of the museum suggested new connective taxonomies and a heightened awareness of cultural positioning as each viewer negotiated a personal path through the display.

Conclusions

This chapter has described how two exhibitions, *Hold* and *Thinking Path*, considered the problematic relationship between colonial pasts and contemporary realities and sought to identify modes of presentation applicable to, and reflective of, the heightened awareness of contemporary society. Investigated within regional museums, both exhibitions reflected the uniquely evolved nature and cultural position of host collections and developed visual expressions that explored artefacts in relation to their particular origin and current location.

Of particular relevance to this practice has been Susan Pearce's effective articulation of the relevance of linguistic theory within the museum context. Her insight has shown that Saussure's principles can provide a logical framework for understanding the interrelation and evolution of material cultures, and the practical work described here has sought to further define this relationship in visual form. Reflecting and building upon Pearce's application of Saussure, the text has described how *Hold* and *Thinking Path* developed specific and focused visual responses to diachronic and consequently synchronic understandings of artefacts and sites.

Within *Hold*, connective processes created physically and conceptually dependent works that manifested tangible links between the current site of the collection and the geographically distant realities underpinning the artefacts within it. The hybrid approach of curatorial practice became actual rather than implied, shaping the artworks and re-aligning the reception of the artefacts themselves. In *Thinking Path*, the role of artist curator evolved further to include specifically targeted collections forming the exhibition tour. The communicative aspects of the work were further expanded through the heightened curatorial role adopted at each venue, where the repositioning of artefacts and artworks in particular relation to each other created synchronic meanings that remained negotiable for the viewer on an individual basis.

Both *Hold* and *Thinking Path* used artefacts 'actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations' (Prown 1982: 1). Material processes were used to manifest empathic links between the represented world of the artefact and the actual world of the viewer (Prown 1982: 8), mirroring Prown's observation that 'encounter between an object with its history and an individual with his history shapes the deductions. Neither is what they were nor what they may become' (Prown 1982: 9). The description of key stages of production within each exhibition and the significance of encounter as a fundamental spur to research and production 'in pursuit of the direct rendition of experience' defined the diachronic and synchronic in visual form (Macleod and Holdridge 2006: 11). The identification of a numerical basis linked to the provenance of an object, or the scale of a site, was used to form a diachronic understanding of the ensuing artwork, manifesting factual links between the past and the present. The consequent inclusion of additional historic and contemporary references related to the trajectory of the artefact, or the resonance of the venues, created further connective synchronic links. In this way each exhibition became a flexible catalyst of meanings that enabled a permeable interface of understanding between artefact, artwork, site and audience.

Notes

- 1 Aspects of this text first appeared within Shirley Chubb's PhD thesis 'Intervention, location and cultural positioning: working as a contemporary artist curator in British museums', undertaken within the School of Arts and Communication, University of Brighton (Chubb 2007).
- 2 The exhibitions were exhibited as follows:
Hold: Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, 11 March–2 April 1995
 University of Essex Gallery, 16 January–9 February 1996
 Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, 5 April–3 May 1997
Thinking Path: Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, 7 February–17 April 2004
 Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, 1 May–30 August 2004
 Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth, 29 September 2004–23 January 2005
 Down House, Kent, 2 February–29 May 2005.
- 3 Angola became independent on 10 November 1975, itself an anniversary of the meeting of Stanley and Livingstone 104 years earlier.
- 4 The sequential journalistic extracts read as follows: the flag / clash / shot dead / third anniversary / 'victories' / aid and comfort / dogfight / national day / contradictory claims / quest / plea / one white and one black / dispute battle credit / mediated talks / legacy / cycle / family / stands on the brink / each day / called off.
- 5 Darwin was born in Shrewsbury and *Thinking Path* was commissioned by Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery to launch the 2004 Darwin Festival.
- 6 Culler goes further to state that 'Any purposiveness in biological evolution, Darwin saw, does not lie in changes themselves but wholly in the process of natural selection, which is, in a sense, a synchronic process' (Culler 1985: 64).
- 7 Rosalind Krauss' essay 'Grids' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* is pertinent here (Krauss 1993: 9–22).
- 8 Core artefacts exhibited at each tour venue alongside *Thinking Path* included:
 From the collections of Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery:
Darwinian Ape c.1890, ceramic with bronze finish, probably Austrian
Fragment of Log-boat Date unknown, possibly prehistoric Chelmarsh, south-east Shropshire

- Grinshill Sandstone with Fossil Ripple Marks* Triassic period, Grinshill, north Shropshire. From the collections of Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery:
Pregnancy Garment, early twentieth century, East South Africa
20 Quartz Specimens from the J.F. Manteau Collection, the René Gallant Collection, the R. Barstow Collection, the Sir John St. Aubyn Collection and the Babbington Collection.
- 9 The Darwin family used to holiday near Bournemouth and the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum collection is renowned for its expression of high Victorian sensibilities.

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